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MRS. RICHARD BELDEN, PROXY

By EFFIE STEVENS

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There, Jessica could have done that a bit better herself if she was a housekeeper with more experience to her credit." End Maynard declared, as she surveyed the daintily appointed luncheon table set for two with self-satisfied eyes. "He'll never for a moment guess that I'm not Mrs. Richard Belden." She laughed merrily.

While at breakfast that morning her hostess, young Mrs. Belden, had received a telegram from her husband, who was off on a business trip, saying that he had chanced to meet his former college chum, Sprague, and learning that he would be passing through Mayville on the 20th had exacted from him a promise to stop off and make the acquaintance of Mrs. Belden.

"It's the 20th today," Mrs. Belden had exclaimed in a tone of dismay, having read the message aloud for End's benefit. "He'll be here at noon and will naturally expect me to ask him to lunch with us. What ever shall I do? With my appointment at the dentist's on hand, too—

"I can't possibly get back from the city in time," she added, after a pause, "and I don't dare let my teeth go another day. Oh dear, I don't see why Dick had to be so incurable—eaten to send a strange man whom I've never seen and never expect to see again, on the one day it's going to put me out dreadfully to have him."

"I think you're unjust to blame poor Dick, when he knows absolutely nothing about your appointment," End had remarked warmly. "I'm sure if I had a husband I wouldn't blame him for what he couldn't know anything about."

"Oh, no you'd be a model of wifely devotion, of course," her friend had



Sought the Shady Front Piazza.

interrupted scathingly. "I suppose you'd willingly lose a tooth just for the sake of entertaining a young man who happened to be at Harvard when your husband was!"

It was then that an imp of mischief, cowering under the name of friendly triflingness, had taken possession of End.

"I was going to come to your aid if you wanted to give me a chance," End had retorted. "Why can't I be Mrs. Richard Belden for the occasion?" You say this Mr. Sprague has never seen you. We're enough alike in form and general coloring to make the same description fit us both, unless Dick has displaced your trade graph."

To my knowledge the only photo graphs of me in Dick's possession are the one I had taken in college days and gown and the one in my wedding finery." Mrs. Belden had declared in a relieved tone, "and I'd any one to recognize me as the original of either. You know I've always taken such a poor picture that I haven't cared to sit for many. I suppose I oughtn't to accept your offer, but as you generally manage to get your own way there's no use expostulating. Mrs. O'Brien is to be here all day fronting, and I'm sure she'll be only too glad to help you. She's a respectable middle-aged Irish woman, and ought to be a sufficient charmer."

"Please don't forget that I'm Mrs. Richard Belden," End had reminded her with a laugh. "But your Mrs. O'Brien may wait on table if it will ease your conscience."

In getting her friend safely off, and in coaching the valuable and volatile Mrs. O'Brien, End had found little opportunity for calmer second thought.

Now, however, as she left the dining-room and sought the shady, front piazza for a short period of rest, before the arrival of the guest, she began to regret that she had placed herself in a position which she now saw must be embarrassing, even though she were never found out—that was too dreadful a possibility even to contemplate.

"Jessica ought not to have accepted my offer," she thought acutely, as she settled herself in a comfortable

chair and took from her wallet the blue and white luncheon set, which her husband had brought her from Paris, which he had decided would be a most appropriate gift for a young companion to be found engaged soon. The real dinner would probably have been caught reading the latest *Le Figaro*.

End, however, was not a woman to live for long.

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